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ABSTRACT

The cogency and applicability of ethnography as it pertains to the improvement of research on the social studies classroom are the focus of this paper. The evaluation asks how close the relationship is between ethnography as defined in anthropology and the classroom ethnographic approach presented by Shaver and Larkins, and how viable the need is to generate field theory to advance the cause of social studies research. The domain of ethnography, its relationship with theory, the level of insight it is designed to achieve, and the problem of cultural perspective are areas discussed in relation to the study of the social studies classroom. Two of the major premises of the Shaver and Larkins proposal on classroom ethnography are examined to see how much is known about the teaching and learning process in social studies and whether ethnography can generate the kind of theory that is needed. It is concluded that ethnography is not suited to the purpose of formulating middle range theory in the area of psychology of the instructional process, but that researchers might apply it to examine social education within the context of the culture at large. (Author/KSM)

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Some Observations Concerning Ethnography and the Improvement of Research in Social Education

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If there is in fact any controversy over the quality of research in social studies education it is not manifested in the current literature of the field. Upon exposure to the prevading sense of condemnation permeating the literature of the last decade-Shaver and Larkins notwithstanding-one is left with the most abject and despondent of attitudes regarding the subject. To be sure, any call to come and muster in praise of the research accumulated to date would more than likely generate only the most exiguous assemblage of true-believers imaginable.

Of course there is hope since there are those who are of a mind to do something about the melancholy state of affairs. Shaver and Larkins are of this stripe and the main purpose of their chapter on the subject is to suggest ways whereby this current state of affairs can be uplifted. While most of the chapter is devoted to considerations of an academic nature-such as the need for closing the gap between theoretical and investigative endeavors-the closing section is devoted to a specific proposal which the authors feel offers a promising alternative-an approach they have chosen to label "classroom ethnography."

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the cogency and applicability of ethnography as it pertains to the improvement of research on the social studies classroom. The evaluation will focus upon two central questions of interest. First, how close is the relationship between ethnography as it is defined in anthropology and the classroom ethnographic

approach presented by Shaver and Larkins? Second, how viable is the argument that there is a preeminent need to generate field theory in order to significantly advance the cause of social studies research?

I. Classroom Ethnography: An Anthropological Perspective

The term ethnography has been used almost exclusively by anthropologists and for this reason it is important that we examine its pertinence with reference to the objectives and procedures as they have been established and practiced in that discipline. Hopefully, this will allow the reader to make an enlightened judgement concerning the extent to which the application of the term ethnography to the study of the social studies classroom may be directly valid, only metaphorical, or completely inappropriate. Let us then very briefly examine the definition, purpose, scope and methodology of ethnography from the viewpoint of the anthropologist.

Any number of sources could be consulted for a denotative meaning of the term and Philip Bock's definition is representative when he describes ethnography as the accurate recording of the structure and modes of behavior of individual cultures.[1] While ethnographies are delimited in scope to the investigation of single societies, they may range from descriptions of entire societies, such as Berreman's study of the Pahari Hindus, to accounts of particular conceptual subsystems such as Pospisil's study of the laws of inheritance of the Kapauku Papuans.[2]

The requirement for maintaining a holistic perspective delegates certain limits on the extent to which the specificity of the social structure and modes of behavior within subsystems may be reduced. This question will be treated later in the paper.

With reference to purpose, Black and Metzger view the goals of the ethnographer as falling within the context of a search for the questions that the people of a society are responding to when they behave in systematic ways. This would include an inquiry into the relevant stimuli extant in the social situation under investigation.[3]

Finally, with reference to methodology, the ethnographer collects data through participant and non-participant observation, the eliciting of information through informant interviews, and the meticulous recording of extensive field notes. These data are then put to use by the ethnographer in writing a careful description and analysis of the social system under investigation.

Given this very general description, there does not appear to be a serious discrepancy between Shaver and Larkin's discussion and the anthropological view. However, upon closer scrutiny, we can discern certain areas of cleavage between the requirements of ethnography and the stringent application of these criteria to the study of the social studies classroom. These variformities will be treated according to four categories of concern: first, the scope and domain of ethnography; second, the relationship

between ethnography and theory; third, the level of insight that ethnography is designed to achieve; and fourth, the problem of cultural perspective.

Domain. Although it has traditionally been the case that ethnographies have been extensive and comprehensive in their scope, it is also the case that they may range from large scale accounts encompassing entire societies to tightly written reports of societal subsystems. All of the definitions encountered by this writer reflected the macro-ethnographic orientation through their use of such terms as "single societies" and "individual cultures." This macro-ethnographic approach is reflected in the vast majority of the students conducted to date.

Within recent years there has emerged a body of literature devoted to a discussion of what has been loosely labeled "the new ethnography."[4] Known also as ethnoscience, componential analysis and cognitive anthropology, this approach seeks to apply the methods of linguistics to isolated components of a social system. To date such studies have been extremely limited in scope to such phenomena as kinship terminologies, color classification systems, biological taxonomies and the like. While Saliba and others have discussed the potential of the "new ethnography" for the study of larger social subsystems, such as the function of religion, these notions have not yet advanced to the empirical stage.[5]

Clearly classroom ethnography must fall somewhere between macro-ethnography and ethnoscience in terms of its domain of interest. Since

Shaver and Larkins make no reference to ethnoscience, nor to the methods associated with that school of thought, we must assume they are invoking the term ethnography in its more time-honored sense. This would be supported by their contention that ethnography represents a holistic endeavor.[6]

Can we then establish the limits to which a cultural system may be reduced and still remain within the realm of the holistic? There are no hard and fast rules, however, we can establish examples of subsystems that are so diminutive in scale as to remove them from the proper sphere of ethnographic investigation. The criteria by which subsystems are judged to be beyond the scope of ethnography emanate from the purpose of the approach itself. The overriding purpose is to provide insight into the specific cultural context in which the particular modes of behavior are occurring. In order to place the behavior into a cultural context one must be able to relate the subsystem under investigation to the culture at large and this in turn requires some apparent or esoteric integration between that subsystem and other institutional contexts. Without some sort of macro-cultural point of reference the study lapses into areas of interest that are more properly within the province of one or more of the other social sciences. Therefore, while we find that ethnographers are willing to restrict their studies to societal subsystems, they usually carve out rather large segments of structure and behavior such as Smith's study of the negro family in British Guiana or Marshall's account of marriage among

the !Kung Bushmen.[7] In the cases of ethnographies where the social domain of the study has been more severely restricted we usually find that the conceptual context of the subsystem assures attention to the cultural context. For example, in the study of descent and kinship patterns we find the conceptual and cultural context to be uniquely governed through language.

This brings us then to question whether or not the classroom can properly be considered to be within the domain of legitimate ethnography. This can only be answered by considering the extent to which the cultural factor is considered to be preeminent. The authors do not provide the reader with a specific delineation of the factors that are to be taken into consideration; however, their reliance upon the work of Louis Smith leads us to assume that they consider his theories on the classroom as a social system to be germane. Reference to Smith's work in this area, particularly as outlined in his co-authored educational psychology text, discloses an almost exclusively sociological treatise based upon the work of Homans and Cornell and devoid of any explicit consideration of the larger cultural context in which the classroom is situated.[8] An examination of the pioneer work on classroom ethnography by Smith and Geoffrey, cited by Shaver and Larkins, denotes a concern for sociological and psychological variables such as teacher probing, pupil anxiety, pupil interest, student roles and decision-making. One could stretch the point that because the study is also concerned about teacher-student value relationships within a divergent subcultural context that the study meets the ethnographic requirement. However,

if one chooses to make the distinction between sociological and anthropological studies, the resultant document is clearly within the sociological camp. There is no explicit attempt at interinstitutional or macrocultural analysis nor do we find a definitive distinction made between cultural deprivation and socioeconomic disadvantage in the chapter on the cultural deprived child, the segment of the book which would ostensibly hold the most promise for the anthropologist.[10]

Shaver and Larkins propose a further reduction in the domain of interest to the study of the teaching and learning of social studies in the classroom. This delimitation of the sphere of interest coupled with the statements earlier in the chapter that we need to be mainly concerned about the application of psychological theory to the teaching and learning of social studies would seem to remove the domain of interest from the holistic purpose of ethnography, at least as it has been heretofore conceived.[11]

Theory. There has been some discussion within the ranks of anthropology concerning the proper relationship between ethnography and theory. For example, Hoebel[12] and Herkovits[13] have taken the position that ethnography is basically and primarily a descriptive endeavor while Berreman[14] and Werner and Fenton[15] have argued that ethnography must, of necessity, involve the legitimate accumulation of theory. Shaver and Larkins are in alignment with the latter position in their call for the generation of tentative propositions as the most significant goal of the ethnographic approach. It is, therefore, important that we consider the nature of ethnographic

generalizations as well as the means whereby they are subjected to validation and verification.

Homans has stated that in order for the social sciences to maintain a high order of explanatory power it is necessary that they be concerned about propositions in which it is evident that the control of one variable has an influence upon another variable of interest.[16] This is consistent with the scientific approach to human behavior and we must assume that when Shaver and Larkins use the term "classical statistical approach" they mean the kinds of methodological designs that are consistent with this model. The kinds of propositions found in the ethnographic account do typically interrelate variables, however, they may tell us only indirectly what would happen to one variable if another is controlled. For example, in Gluckman's study of the Lozi of Zambia we find the statement: "Marriage payment gives a man the right to exclude other men from his wife, and the right to control her."[17] While variables are interrelated, it does not make a great deal of sense to talk about the experimental verification of the proposition, nor about the subjection of the finding to the approaches consistent with classical statistical design. Ordinarily, the ethnographer is not concerned about the formulation of hypotheses that lend themselves to such procedures since the epistemological purpose calls for observation and description rather than the manipulation of the variables of interest.

There are, of course, means whereby ethnographic reports are subjected

to verification. Haekel's discussion of source criticism in ethnography is germane. The methods typically utilized are: internal and external criticism of the report, authentication of artifacts, comparison of the evidence and findings against other sources on the culture, and consideration of the credentials of the researchers and interpreters. Verification of the findings of the report is done through replication of the study in the field consistent with the techniques of observation, informant eliciting, collecting of artifacts and field notes.[18]

The techniques for verification should be consistent with the nature of the knowledge that is to be verified. The ethnographer is not bound by the beliefs and strictures of the experimentalist and it is possible to consider that the theory and knowledge generated through ethnography is valid in its own right, provided it is subjected to the modes of criticism and replication defined above.

Insight and Triviality. Social science is charged with the obligation of providing us with insights into human behavior that go beyond what may be held through common sense or experience. What level of theoretical insight can we expect to achieve through ethnography?

Werner and Fenton consider the knowledge generated through ethnographic endeavor to be first-level anthropological theory.[19] The descriptive assertions derived are restricted to the context of the culture under investigation, at the macrocultural level. Because the insights are holistic and descriptive, they may seem to be self-evident, or even trivial, to the natives of the culture in question. Gluckman's statement concerning the relationship between brideprice and the social interactions among husband,

wife and other males would no doubt seem trite to the Lozi.[20] An ethnographer from an alien culture who might study the American institution of professional football would probably write an account including both intended and unintended functions, and yet it is doubtful that these insights would seem to be especially poignant to most Americans.[21] This is not to imply that first-level theory cannot provide cultural insights to members of the society under study, or even that most Lozi or Americans are aware of the unintentional consequences of their own behavior. However, it is the case that ethnography exists for the purpose of generating holistic "first-level theory." In most cases it can be assumed that most Americans who proceed through the elementary and secondary schools in the United States would not find a traditional ethnographic account of the classroom to be particularly enlightening. Of course, Shaver and Larkins are calling for something which proceeds far beyond first-level insight, but the point here is that this is not consistent with the purposes and traditions of ethnography.

Cultural Perspective. Historically, the purpose of ethnography has been to provide an increased understanding of alien cultures. Thus, in Murdoch's ethnographic atlas we find that the 862 cultures listed are either non-western and/or primitive.[22] O'Leary's more recent ethnographic bibliography lists a large number of sources, most of which cite studies that are cross-cultural in nature.[23] Neither source includes studies that have been conducted on the institutions of modern Anglo-American society. Recently this tradition has been subverted through the application of anthropological techniques to the study of Anglo-American

institutions by American anthropologists. This raises the question about the need to maintain a concern for the cultural perspective in intracultural studies, if only to provide a rejoinder to the contention that there is no real difference between the sociologist and the anthropologist who investigates his own culture.

Pelto has observed that anthropology is fundamentally a cross-cultural endeavor.[24] Concern for the cross-cultural element can be achieved in two ways. First, the anthropologist can conduct a comparative study such as that done by Warren in which he studied the social control of teachers' classroom behavior with regard to the treatment of political issues in German and American classrooms.[25] Second, the anthropologist can investigate the patterns of behavior as they occur in alien societies. The former approach is more properly classified within the rubric of ethnology since it involves the comparison of two cultures whereas ethnographies are restricted to the study of single societies. Therefore, the latter approach represents the most viable way in which the cross-cultural element can be achieved in ethnography. John Ogbu's study of education in the Los Angeles slums provides one very good example of how the cultural perspective is achieved when the culture of origin of the investigator is different from that of the society he is studying. (Ogbu is Nigerian).[26] It is not being argued that intracultural studies cannot provide meaningful insights into the cultural factor, only that the investigator has a more difficult time identifying the subtleties of the cultural perspective and removing himself from the cultural mileux of his origin. In the Smith and Geoffrey study and the Washington University

dissertations one finds only a passing concern for cultural factors, the major interest being in the identification of variables associated with what we in the western view call the psychology of teaching. In this sense these studies do not reflect the concern for cultural perspective that is the guiding purpose of anthropological investigation.

II. The Need for Ethnographic Research on the Classroom

In this segment of the paper we will discuss two of the major premises of the Shaver and Larkins proposal on classroom ethnography: (1) that we know little about the teaching and learning process as it pertains to the social studies, and (2) that ethnography can generate the kind of theory that the authors feel is needed.

At the opening of the section on classroom ethnography, the authors state that: "We know little about the intricate inter-relationships among teachers, pupils and their environment and the ends sought which make up the tangled web of instruction and learning in the social studies."[27] This assessment is offered in support of their contention that the need for observational research is fundamental to the furtherance of meaningful research on the social studies classroom. Can we so easily dismiss the considerable body of theory that already exists as reflected in the research by Bellack, Cornell, Flanders, Rosenshine, Amidon and a host of others? [28] The fact that a considerable number of studies in elementary social studies are now empirically testing the theories of Piaget in the classroom, without the benefit of interim observational studies, further supports the notion that

we are ready to proceed directly with the business of theory verification. On the other hand, it would be foolish to argue that there is not a need to generate new theory, particularly with reference to the implementation recently developed strategies and materials. Nevertheless, it seems to be overstating the case to say that we know little about classroom interactions as they pertain to teaching and learning in the social studies. It can therefore be argued that there is at least as great, if not a more,immediate need to verify existing theory.

Accepting the notion that there is some need to improve and expand upon existing instructional theory we must consider the role that ethnography can legitimately be expected to serve in this regard. In the first place, it should be noted that ethnography is more than a collection of related data collecting procedures, it is also a term that is applied to the product of those endeavors. It is not technically correct to apply the rubric to an investigative effort simply because it involves participant observation, informant eliciting and the accumulation of field notes. Earlier in this paper we noted that the ethnographer is concerned about holism, domain and identification of the cultural factor. This in turn directly defines the purpose of his research and the end toward which the data collecting techniques are directed. In view of our earlier discussion it does not seem that ethnography is best suited to the purpose of formulating middle range theory in the area of the psychology of the instructional process.

If we dispense with the concern for the proper application of labels, we can find merit in the techniques recommended by the authors for the formulation of new theory. While the purposes may not mesh closely with the usual goals of ethnography, the methodology described holds promise for the generation of innovative concepts and the derivation of new insights into the teaching of social studies.

In closing, it would not be proper to leave the reader with the impression that ethnography, in the full anthropological sense of the term, holds minimal promise for future social studies research. If one expands the scope of interest beyond the immediate domain of the classroom, it is possible to envisage studies where researchers might examine social education within the context of the culture at large. Questions of interest might include: How are cultural values learned? What is the relative influence of various institutions; the family, school, church, peers, upon the learning of social values? How do cultural values influence the ways in which these institutions directly or indirectly influence social learning? How do the values of the culture at large influence the implementation of formalized social education programs in the schools?

Other anthropological approaches including ethnology, ethnoscience and ethnopsychology also have potential merit for the expansion and improvement of research in social education, particularly with reference to the study of the integration of cognitive and cultural factors. In moving toward the anthropological approach we should make every attempt to adopt the purpose as well as the methodology in order that we may expand our knowledge with regard to the cultural perspective.

NOTES

[1]Philip Bock. Modern Cultural Anthropology: An Introduction. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.

[2]Gerald D. Berreman. Hindus of the Himalayas. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, and Leopold Pospisil. "A Formal Analysis of Substantive Law: Kapauku Papuan Laws of Inheritance," American Anthropologist. 67: December 1965, pp. 166-185.

[3]Mary Black and Duane Metzger."Ethnography Description and the Study of Law," American Anthropologist. 67: December, 1965, pp. 141-165.

[4]Linguistic anthropologists prefer the terms ethnoscience or componential analysis. Ethnoscience is the most commonly used term in the literature.

[5]John Saliba. "The New Ethnography and the Study of Religion," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. 13: June, 1974, pp. 145-159.

[6]James P. Shaver and A. Guy Larkins. "Research on Teaching Social Studies," Chapter 39 in Robert W. Travers. Second Handbook of Research on Teaching. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973, p. 1256.

[7]Raymond T. Smith. The Negro Family in British Guiana. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956, and Lorna Marshall. "Marriage Among the Kung Bushmen," Africa, 29: 1959,pp. 335-364.

[8]Louis M. Smith and Bryce B. Hudgins. Educational Psychology: An Application of Social and Behavioral Theory. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964. The section of interest is Unit Three: The Classroom as a Social System.

[9]Louis M. Smith and William Geoffrey. The Complexities of the Urban Classroom: An Analysis Toward a General Theory of Teaching. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.

[10]Ibid. see Chapter 7.

[11]Shaver and Larkins, op. cit. p. 1248.

[12]E. A. Hoebel. Anthropology: The Study of Man. New York: McGraw-Hill,1966.

[13]M. J. Herskovits. Cultural Anthropology. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.

[14]Gerald D. Berreman."Ethnography: Method and Product," in James A. Clifton, ed., Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968, pp. 336-373.

[15] Oswald Werner and Joann Fenton. "Method and Theory in Ethnoscience or Ethnoepistenology," in Raoul Naroll and Ronald Cohen, ed., A Handbook of Method in Cultural Anthropology. New York: Columbia University Press, 1973, pp. 537-578.

[16] George Homans. The Nature of Social Science. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967.

[17] Max Gluckman. "Kinship and Marriage Among the Lozi of Northern Rhodesia and the Zulu of the Natal," in A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde, ed., African Systems of Kinship and Marriage. London: Oxford University Press, p. 186.

[18] Josef Haekel. "Source Criticism in Anthropology," in Naroll and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 147-164.

[19] Werner and Fenton, op. cit., p. 541.

[20] Gluckman, op. cit., p. 186.

[21] Bock has discussed how the ethnographer might study the institution of American football. See Philip Bock. op. cit. pp.

[22] George P. Murdoch. Ethnographic Atlas. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967.

[23] Timothy O'Leary. "Ethnographic Bibliographies", in Naroll and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 128-146.

[24] Pertti J. Pelto. The Study of Anthropology. Columbus: Chas. E. Merrill, 1965, p. 5.

[25] Richard L. Warren. "The Classroom as a Sanctuary for Teachers: Discontinuities in Social Control," American Anthropologist. 75: Feb.,1973, 280-291.

[26] John Ogbu. The Next Generation: An Ethnography of an Urban Neighborhood. Seminar Press. 1973.

[27] Shaver and Larkins. op. cit., p. 1254.

[28] The study of classroom verbal behavior by Bellack and his associates is especially germane since it was conducted in social studies classes. See Arno Bellack, et. al., The Language of the Classroom. New York: Columbia University Press. 1966.